

Simona Cohen

Teaching the Renaissance in the Department of Art History at Tel-Aviv University

Renaissance studies were first introduced at Tel-Aviv University by the Department of General History in 1960, as part of the program called Europe in the Early Modern Period. In recent years only two staff members have been teaching this field in the History Department; at present there are three, two professors and one senior lecturer. Besides the classic subjects of Italian Renaissance history, which were introduced from the early years by Professor Michel Har-Sagor, courses and seminars of the last decades have included themes related to social, intellectual and ecclesiastical history, gender studies, Utopian theories, and Baroque culture. Every few years an elective introductory course in Renaissance History is offered to undergraduates, and at least one seminar related to the Renaissance is included in the Master's curriculum.

Courses in Renaissance culture are also taught in the Departments of English Studies, French Literature, Philosophy and Art History at Tel-Aviv University. For several years the Department of Musicology offered courses in Renaissance and Baroque theory and practice, given by Professor Dorit Tanai, who directed the department until it was recently closed down. Today she remains the only musicologist teaching the periods of medieval, Renaissance and Baroque music as part of the curriculum of the Academy of Music at Tel-Aviv University.

The Department of Art History at Tel-Aviv University

The Department of Art History was founded in 1972. Initially it was an off-shoot of the History Department (now it is part of the Faculty of Fine Arts), and the earliest courses dealt largely with

Italian Renaissance and Baroque art given by the founder of the department, the Renaissance art-historian Professor Avraham Ronen. Gradually lecturers in various fields joined the staff, and the curriculum was modelled on the periodic division of the Department of History, into Classical, Medieval, Renaissance and Modern Studies. Islamic art was later added to our program and Israeli Art became part of the section of Modern Art. The early Italian orientation remained but courses were increasingly added in Northern Renaissance art, primarily but not exclusively dealing with Early Netherlandish Art. In recent years the focus in elective courses and seminars has been on the sixteenth century in the Netherlands and France.

With the exception of the introductory lectures and the related 'practice' courses, given in each of the five major fields of art-history mentioned above, the curriculum is varied every year. The content of lecture courses and seminars, both on the undergraduate and graduate levels, is largely dependent on the interests and research fields of the lecturers, but an effort is made to offer a broad overview. Some courses, for example, are historically oriented, others are based on iconographic themes, theoretical issues, media, genre types or stylistic problems. Monographic courses or seminars have concentrated on one artist (e.g. Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto, Bosch, Poussin, Caravaggio), one school (e.g. Venetian Art, The Golden Age of Dutch Painting), or one movement (e.g. Mannerism, The Catholic Reformation in Rome).

Methods of Teaching

Methods of teaching are naturally suited to the type of course. The Introduction to Renaissance Art takes place in a large hall, with roughly between 100 to 170 students (about two thirds from the Art History Department, the rest from other disciplines), and is basically a frontal lecture course, although some lecturers try to encourage student participation. The smaller 'practice' group of 10 to 20 students concentrates on methodological issues, reading of scholarly articles, academic writing, and in depth study of specific issues and problems that were presented in the Introduction. These classes are based on student preparation and active participation. Seminars at all levels are ideally based on student discussions and debates, short presentations leading to their written seminar papers and methodological instruction. Here student initiative and creative thinking are encouraged. Occasionally a lecturer from another discipline of Renaissance studies (e.g. a musicologist or historian) is invited to broaden the scope and context, or to introduce interdisciplinary aspects related to the seminar topic.

Status of the Department and Popularity of Renaissance Studies

The formal status of the Art History Department at Tel-Aviv University, in general, and that of Medieval and Renaissance Art, in particular, has been declining in the past decades. This is primarily due to the financial straits of the university (unfortunately the case of all the universities in Israel) and the drastic cut in funds that has adversely affected the Humanities first and foremost. Government financial support to the universities has been significantly reduced as funds are directed elsewhere. But the decline is also due to a policy, advocated by several members of our academic administration in the past decades, to gradually eliminate the department by cutting off financial support and systematically reducing the number of lecturers. Ten or fifteen

years ago there were about three senior lecturers (including professors) and about the same number of junior lecturers in each section, including the Renaissance. Regarding the Renaissance: in 2008/9 there were two professors teaching full time, and two junior lecturers teaching part time (50 % & 25 %). From 2009/10 only one professor remained and there were three part-time junior lecturers. Today there is not even one professor of Renaissance Art, and two junior members are hoping to be promoted to the status of "lecturer" (which precedes senior lecturer, associate professor and full-professor). From this it is clear that: 1. when a senior staff member retires, the post he leaves is no longer available and there is no possibility for a suitable replacement; 2. future employment for PhD graduates in the department is highly improbable.

It is surprising that, despite this situation, our students continue to show lively interest in Renaissance Art. The number of students participating in the *Introduction to Renaissance Art* in the first semester this year was 141 and in the second 155. In contrast to past years, when this was an obligatory annual course, now only eight out of twelve introductory courses, given on a semester basis, are obligatory; it is noteworthy that many students have chosen to participate in both semesters of the *Introduction to Renaissance Art*. Other Renaissance courses are also popular, with between 70 and 100 students in each. The large number of participants also reflects the cut in staff and the limited number of elective courses. There are between 7 and 20 students in each seminar (undergraduate and graduate). Renaissance Art is the second most popular field, after Modern and Israeli Art. Since 2004 about 20 students have completed a Master Thesis in Renaissance Art; during this same period 6 doctoral students have completed PhD dissertations and 6 more are in various stages of writing.

Courses in Renaissance Art that have been taught in recent years

Renaissance Painting in France (BA Lecture Course)

Courtly Art in France: 14th – 15th Century (BA Lecture Course)

Painters of Light: 17th Century, Italian and Dutch Masters (BA Seminar)

Mannerism in the North (BA Seminar)

Definitions of Baroque Art: Questions and Issues (MA Seminar)

Tendencies in Seventeenth Century French Painting (BA Seminar)

Folly, Sin and Vanity in Northern Renaissance Art (MA Seminar)

Artistic Exchanges between the Netherlands and Italy in the Fifteenth Century (MA Lecture Course)

Artists, Works and Audiences: Northern Renaissance and Baroque (MA Seminar)

Caravaggio as a Modernist (BA Lecture Course)

Deciphering Bosch; Reading Brueghel (MA Seminar)

Bruges to Florence: Artistic Exchanges (BA Course)

Reality and Metaphor: Dutch Golden Age Painting (BA Seminar)

Folly, Vanity and Social Criticism: From Bosch to Hogarth (MA Seminar)

Netherlandish Painting in the Fifteenth Century – Sacred versus “Everyday Life” (BA Lecture

Course)

Painting in Light; Painting in Shadow; Art and Theory (BA Seminar)

The Power of Women – Eve and her Offspring (BA Seminar)

Nicolas Poussin – A Mute Poet (MA Seminar)

Painted Sermons, Moralization, Allegorical Lessons and Irony in the Œuvre of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (MA Seminar)

(Prof. Yona Pinson)

The Golden Age of Venetian Art (BA Lecture Course)

Tintoretto (MA Seminar)

Titian and his Age (BA Seminar)

Light and Shade in Venetian Art: Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese (BA Seminar)

Art in Venice between East and West (BA Lecture Course)

Portraiture in the Renaissance (BA Lecture Course)

Ways of Looking at Renaissance Art (a): The High Renaissance in Central Italy

Ways of Looking at Renaissance Art (b): The Late Renaissance in Central Italy

The Creative Process of the Renaissance Artist (MA Seminar)

Secular Tendencies in Renaissance Iconography (MA Seminar)

Mannerism: Between Classicism and Baroque (MA Seminar)

Michelangelo and the Revolution in Art (MA Seminar)

The Art of Rome during the Renaissance (BA Lecture Course)

Images of Women in Renaissance Art (BA Lecture Course)

Scholars and Scholarship: Chapters in Renaissance Iconography (MA Seminar)

Images and Meanings: Animals in Italian Renaissance Art (MA Seminar)

Aesthetics and Style in Italian Renaissance Art (BA Lecture course)

(Prof. Simona Cohen)

Ephemeral Art and Eternal Glory, 1500–1700 (BA Lecture Course)

The Renaissance Myth: From Burckhardt to Carlo Ginzburg and from Giotto to Michelangelo (BA Seminar)

Goya and the Age of Enlightenment (BA Lecture Course)

Methodologies in Renaissance Art History (BA Seminar)

The Play of Realism in Northern Renaissance Art (BA Lecture Course)

The Inter-Cultural Renaissance (MA Seminar)

Art and Science in the Renaissance and Baroque (MA Seminar)

(Dr. Tamar Cholcman)

Non-identical Twins: the Competitive Comparison between Painting and Sculpture in Italian Renaissance, its Theory and Practice (BA Lecture Course)

Bernini and the Art of Portraiture; Rome 1620–1680 (BA Lecture Course)

Bronzino, Painter and Poet, Art in the Court of the Medici, Florence 1520–1579 (BA Seminar)

(Dr. Sefy Hendler)

From the Art of High Renaissance to the Art of the Counter-Reformation

Art and Propaganda in Italy in the 16th Century

Faith and Heresy in 16th Century Art

The Art in Rome from Michelangelo to Bernini: Splendor, Crisis and Renewal

(the above are BA lecture Courses)

(Dr. Golda Balas)

Renaissance Art is also taught in the Departments of Art History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Haifa University, and Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba. The Departments of Art History at Haifa and Beersheba are comparatively young. At Ben-Gurion University the undergraduate program, in which the Renaissance is a prime field of specialization, was founded twelve years ago and the graduate program was initiated only three years ago. There are approximately 10 graduate students there specializing in Renaissance and Baroque Art. As in Tel-Aviv, some of them writing a MA thesis; the rest are completing their studies with a final exam (these

cannot proceed towards a PhD). The department has two senior lecturers in Renaissance and Baroque art, each one presently supervising five students who are majoring in the field. In addition, there are three doctoral students, who have also been teaching undergraduate courses (e.g. Baroque Art and Music). The undergraduate program includes an introductory course, a pro-seminar, a seminar and an elective course in Renaissance Art. Course themes are similar in orientation to those at Tel-Aviv. At the master's level there is generally one seminar and one elective course. In the Beersheba Department of Art History the popularity of Renaissance Art takes second place after Modern and Israeli Art.

Conclusion

The picture one receives of Renaissance studies at the four major Israeli universities mentioned is more or less consistent; the formal status of the departments teaching Renaissance culture and history has seriously deteriorated due to the decrease in finances. This is reflected in the decrease in the number of staff members, lack of incentive for young graduates to advance in the departments, and insufficient funds for projects that were undertaken in the past, such as international conferences and guest lectures by scholars from abroad. On the other hand, the continuing interest of our students and their unfailing demand for courses on the Renaissance is a source of encouragement and promise for the future.

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The author is professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University.

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